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A Color-Band Study of Brewer Blackbirds

By LAIDLAW WILLIAMS

"Why do you choose those unpleasant blackbirds to study — such noisy, aggressive creatures!" That's what many people ask me when they hear that I am doing a color-banding study of the Brewer Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) at Carmel, California.

A local soda fountain proprietor telephones me saying that he has a little bird alive in a box and it has colored bracelets on it. Do I want it? At the soda fountain I find BKS-GR (that is: black celluloid over the numbered aluminum band, or "S", on the right leg, green over red on the left), a female who had taken up residence on Carmel's main street. She had been attacked by a gang of neighboring blackbirds, possibly for trespass. Although not territorial as the Song Sparrow or the Wren-tit, a Brewer Blackbird will be "ganged up on" sometimes if it strays too close to a neighbor's nest. In the case of BKS-GR, apparently she had been so vigorously attacked, perhaps even struck by other blackbirds, that she was stunned and was picked up from the sidewalk by a truck driver who was delivering coca cola to the soda fountain.

But that wasn't the last of BKS-GR. Some time after this incident the keeper of the local wine shop phoned excitedly to report she was inside his place. Would the anthropomorphist say she was in need of stimulants stronger than coca cola after another attack?

Although living in a faunal area where there are such interesting species as the Pygmy Nuthatch, Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Hutton Vireo, I chose the Brewer Blackbird partly because a nesting colony is located at my banding station, the sexes are readily distinguishable by appearance (a great help to a field worker), and, up to the present, no one has bothered to make a study of them. Perhaps it is a pity to ignore the birds typical of the region and pick out a bird that anyone in the whole western part of the United States could work on, but I believe there is something rather intriguing about finding heretofore unknown facts about a bird so common that it is generally ignored by the bird student. So I am working on blackbirds even though such spectacular and colorful birds as the Black Oystercatcher, and the White-tailed Kite are near at hand and have not been exhaustively studied as yet.

But the Brewer Blackbird is far from colorless. The purple and green "reflections" and yellow iris of the male, the rich brown iris and soft gray-brown plumage of the female may be subtle but they are handsome. Nestings of both sexes have dull grayish blue irises. One problem that I am trying to solve is just when does the eye color change, the male's becoming yellow and the female's brown. I am beginning to find that the sexes can be distinguished by eye color before the fall moult differentiates them by plumage.

I am finding also that some birds in my colony are remarkably faithful to their mates. Of the eleven pairs nesting there this year four consisted of individuals who had retained their mates from last season — or at least re-mated with the same bird a second time. The other seven pairs were birds new to the colony, or old ones whose mates did not turn up again in the colony. They have a long "engagement" period in the spring, the pairs "going around" together, even in the flock, for as long as three months before actual nesting operations begin. Whenever one of an engaged pair takes flight, the other follows; and if one of them is found on an electric light wire among a flock of twenty or thirty, about two feet away is its "fiancé". It may be that it will be found that even during the fall and winter there is some sort of pair organization. The other day, September 24, two pairs of last spring were "singing" to each other and flying about together. However, this may be only a temporary post-moult-moult season recrudescence of spring activity.

I have also had a good deal of pleasure in finding my birds away from the banding station. Gasoline rationing has kept me from examining flocks at long distances, even if it were likely that many of my birds would be found. But I have run across my birds as far as six miles away from the station. I find a number of my birds regularly at a dairy farm four miles up Carmel Valley. One August day a year ago, while I was looking for Surf Birds and other shore birds on the Pacific Grove waterfront, a flock of blackbirds appeared and there was YS-BeBe, one of the first blackbirds I had banded. Two nestlings were marked this May. A month later, while I was watching Ruddy Ducks and Pied-billed Grebes at a lake in Monterey, five miles away, who should come walking along the bank but one of the banded nestlings!

If I banded on a really large scale some interesting distance returns, like those obtained from ducks, might result. My work is a behavior study rather than a distributional one, with comparatively few birds banded. Banding thousands of blackbirds would help us to understand the movements of the species; they are so easily observed on open fields, city parks and streets throughout a wide range.

It Can't Happen Here

By ETHEL E. RICHARDSON

Teacher and Nature Study Leader, Jefferson School, Berkeley, California

"How It Happens" to Skippy suggests that something also happens to teacher, if she allows herself to concentrate on the "three R's" to the exclusion of all other values in life. At Jefferson School in Berkeley we make every effort to foster and develop that natural interest children have in their environment which is so often stifled by indifferent adults. If Skippy's teacher could be shown incalculable benefits which result to both teacher and children from a bird club she would hasten to allow herself to be "worn down" immediately.

We have a very flourishing Junior Audubon Club at Jefferson School. I cannot imagine not having such a club. The teachers enjoy it as much as the children. I could not begin to enumerate the memorable experiences we have had because of our interest in the life which goes on all around us. Just today David brought a dead Hermit Thrush to School. The day's lesson spontaneously became the mysteries of migration. Phases of both biology and geography were painlessly learned. Every child was keenly interested, although saddened that the winter visit of the small creature had been so brief.

Teaching problems are often worked out through our interest in birds. Michael, with only half-vision, was delegated to a special sight-saving room. He had the heart-warming experiences of healing a Linnet's broken wing. He carried him daily to school on his shoulder, bringing pleasure for weeks to an under-privileged group, and doing much for his own ego. Paul was almost a non-reader until he joined our Junior Audubon Club. Then he sent to the New York office of the National Audubon Society for their entire list of one hundred and forty leaflets in order that he could read the fascinating stories.

Children learn gentleness and kindness through their experiences in taming and attracting birds. For years the gulls from the Bay have kept the noon hour with the children, as they attract the flying wings with scraps from their lunchboxes. They forget their petty differences while learning to move slowly and quietly to win the confidence of the gulls. On the way to school, Marie picked a hungry Green-backed Goldfinch which found a welcome. After the bird had been fed and warmed; he went fearlessly from child to child, remaining all day in the schoolroom. The children had the thrill of a "wild" bird trusting them sufficiently to perch upon their hands. The benefit of the experience remained after the bird had been returned to its guardian, a well-known doctor and member of Berkeley's School Board.

Lessons on the balance of nature and the place of our birds of prey are learned without strain. A little Burrowing Owl came to school assembly of his own accord. He was helped into a big cage, where he sat in state, returning the curious gaze of hundreds of children, before he was dismissed to his field across the way. He started a special interest in owls, which later culminated in an assembly program "for owls only", the Junior Audubon Club exhibiting many fine habitat cases from the visual departments, the members giving reports on different kinds of owls, and Mrs. Reynolds showing her movies of Barn and Great Horned Owls.

The direction of a child's life is often determined by a small incident. One day last May Joan brought in an unfamiliar dead bird. She and the children were impressed by its beautiful plumage, and were anxious to identify it. They made the discovery that it was a Green-tailed Towhee, a bird of the high mountains, never before seen in this area. Joan was thrilled that her find won fame as a very special ornithological record for Berkeley. She had the priv-

ilege of reporting it to Dr. Miller, Director of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, at the University of California. This experience awakened in Joan an interest in the University, and she is planning to go there some day to study in the Museum.

Besides the pleasure and knowledge gained by the children from their personal experiences, their interest and zeal have attracted "bird-friends" to the school. The colored moving pictures of Mrs. Sheldon, Mr. Harwell and Mrs. Reynolds furnish the school's most popular programs.

Exclude the birds from the classroom? No, it just couldn't happen here! Not where a robin family is reared by the open window in full sight of every child — and where no child is surprised if teacher suddenly announces in the midst of the arithmetic lesson, "That's a White-crown singing now", or if she pauses a moment to call attention to the busy Bush-tits in the berry bushes. And if a Road Runner should light on the chimney-top of Jefferson School, I very much fear that teacher would declare a holiday!

Change in Time of Meetings

In the future, due to war conditions, the San Francisco Public Library will close an hour earlier. It will therefore be necessary for the Audubon Association of the Pacific to begin its meetings at 7:30 instead of eight o'clock, as in the past. The meetings will terminate at nine o'clock.



October Field Trip

Although the skies were cloudy at the start of our trip to Lake Merced on the 17th, the sun appeared later and the day was perfect for such an outing. We received our first thrill watching a Sora Rail feeding in the marshy rim of the lake at Fleishhacker Pool. A Salt Marsh Yellow-throat also gave an exhibition from the heights of the grass. After a walk through part of the Zoo, we arrived at the shore of Lake Merced to be greeted with the call of a Belted Kingfisher who flew from the bank almost from under our feet and did several turns across the lake for us. A Northern Phalarope appeared on the lake and stayed close enough so that we were able not only to identify him but also to observe all the feeding antics. There were not many ducks in evidence, just a few on the lake.

We stopped for lunch on the shore, in a little spot overlooking the water. After our repast, we walked to the east end of the lake, doubled back of the Golf Course to the street car line.

Twenty-six species were noted as follows:

Eared Grebe	Northern Phalarope	Robin
Western Grebe	Western Gull	Shrike
Pied-billed Grebe	California Gull	Audubon Warbler
Mallard	Bonaparte Gull	Yellow-throat
Ring-necked Duck	Anna Hummingbird	House Finch
Ruddy Duck	Kingfisher	Pine Siskin
Sora Rail	Red-shafted Flicker	White-crowned Sparrow
Coot	Black Phoebe	Song Sparrow
Killdeer	Bush-tit	

Members attending: Mrs. Bozant, Mr. and Mrs. Kilham, Mr. Myer, Miss Stanton, Mr. Wolff, and three guests.

—Florence B. Stanton, Melville Wolff, *Historians*



Observations

Edited by JUNEA W. KELLY

The following observations have been reported:

Two female Tanagers, Sept. 16; Golden-crowned Sparrows, Sept. 30; Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Oct. 11; Hermit Thrush, Oct. 15; Larkspur. Two Ash-Throated Flycatchers, Sept. 20, Ross. Mary L. Courtright.

Golden-crowned Sparrows, Sept. 20, Shady Lane, Ross, Augusta Samuel.

Golden-crowned Sparrows, Sept. 26; Fox Sparrows, Oct. 2; Black-throated Gray Warbler, Sept. 5; El Sobrante, Contra Costa Co. Walter W. Bradley.

Female Wood Duck, Oct. 3, Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco. (Mr. and Mrs. Kilham reported having seen a female Wood Duck and young at the same place during the summer.) Bell Sparrow at 1750 feet elevation Napa Co. Golden-crowned Sparrow and Audubon Warbler, Oct. 9, Ranch, Napa Co. Joseph J. Webb.

Lewis Woodpecker reappeared Sept. 26 near Walnut Creek, Mocking-birds still present, Walnut Creek. Frances Blake.

Golden-crowned Sparrow, Sept. 28; Hermit Thrush, Oct. 16; Piedmont. Flock (20) of Western Bluebirds, Cordova and Fruitvale Ave., Oct. 28, Oakland. Laurel Reynolds.

Golden-crowned Sparrow, Oct. 3; Hermit Thrush, Oct. 16; Audubon Warbler, Oct. 9; Red-backed Sandpiper, Oct. 2; Alameda. Hermit Warbler, Sept. 25, Golden Gate Park, Juneau W. Kelly.

Audubon Notes

NOVEMBER MEETING: The regular meeting will be held on Thursday, November 11th, at 7:30 p.m. in the Assembly Room, San Francisco Public Library, Larkin and McAllister Streets, San Francisco. (Note change in time.)

Mr. Frank A. Pitelka of the Zoology Department of the University of California will give an illustrated lecture on "Bird Nests of the San Francisco Bay Region." Members may bring guests.

NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP will be taken on Sunday, November 14th, to East Bay Regional Park. Take No. 18 car on 13th St., Oakland, going out Park Blvd. to end of line. Transfer to No. 77 Piedmont Pines bus at 8:57 a.m. Get off at end of bus-line at Ascot, where the party will meet. San Francisco members will take "A" train at 7:25 a.m. from the San Francisco Terminal, and transfer to No. 18 car at 13th and Broadway or First Avenue. Bring luncheon. NOTE: There are only two Piedmont Pines busses a day. The return bus leaves Ascot at about 4:12 p.m.

OCTOBER MEETING: The 313th meeting was held on the 14th in the Assembly Room of the San Francisco Public Library, President Mrs. Harold C. Austin presiding.

On account of a canceled furlough Mr. Harold Kirker was unable to be present at the meeting, and Mr. Don Heyneman, who is also stationed at Pando, Colorado, being in San Francisco, kindly substituted for Mr. Kirker. Messers. Kirker, Heyneman and Sedgwick are all in training in the Rocky Mountains as ski-troopers. Mr. Heyneman described in a most interesting manner the general region of the camp, giving some of its geology, telling about the trees, flowers and birds seen on their camping trips. After training all week these enthusiasts use their free week-ends to climb mountain peaks and camp out in beautiful spots where they have time to photograph flowers and birds. Mr. Heyneman showed fine pictures taken by Mr. Kirker. They are going to keep a complete record of all birds seen during their stay at Camp Pando which will be valuable, as it should cover a whole year. All this shows how beneficial it is for people to have an intense interest in their natural surroundings, no matter in what part of the world they find themselves.

The following were elected to membership: Miss Josephine Lund and Mrs. A. F. Peterson, of Oakland, Miss Florence Plymell of San Francisco, and Private Robert McCornish, Camp McCain, Mississippi.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

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For the Study and the Protection of Birds

President.....Mrs. Harold C. Austin.....541 Boulevard Way, Piedmont 10
 Corresponding Secretary.....Mr. Joseph J. Webb.....519 California St., San Francisco 4
 Treasurer.....Miss Ivander MacIver.....2414 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley 4
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Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 p.m.

Assembly Room, San Francisco Public Library, Larkin and McAllister Streets, San Francisco.

Membership dues, payable January 1st, \$3.00 per year.

Student memberships, \$1.50 per year.

Life memberships, \$50.00.

Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer.